

On Personal Freedom...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), November 24, 1934

Personal freedom is guaranteed to all Egyptians by the provisions of the old Constitution, and by the provisions of the Constitution now sought to be abolished.

And it was guaranteed even before the proclamation of constitutional life, by the ordinary laws, from a time long past; for this generation grew up free, recognizing no one's claim upon it in what it does or refrains from doing, so long as it does not violate the law, nor overstep the bounds of public decency, nor expose others to harm.

It is strange, then, that this personal freedom should be exposed to danger after all these guarantees, after people have trusted in it for so long a time, and after Egyptian generations have grown up in the knowledge that the authorities could not interfere with their personal freedom, nor expose it to arbitrary control and meddling.

Yet this personal freedom has nonetheless had its sanctity openly violated, and in circumstances that call for no such violation. That used to happen in the days of Sidqi Pasha, and the days of Abdel Fattah Pasha, because these two men, and their associates, respected the sanctity of nothing, and held reverence for no one; they governed instead by caprice, imposed their own will and their masters' will by force, set appetite in the place of law, and granted caprice the authority of the Constitution — toying with people's minds, and toying with their own minds too, so that they made it out, to the people and to themselves, that they were executing the law and applying the provisions of the Constitution, even as they trampled this and overstepped that, without the least reserve or restraint. It was not strange, in the bygone era, that the Governor of Daqahlia should impose upon the teachers of compulsory education one style of dress rather than another, and punish them if they disobeyed his order, and make them choose between their post and the tarboosh; nor was it strange that the Governor of Monufia should assert control over beards, and order officials — or "advise" them, though his advice was a command — to shave them, making them choose between letting them grow and keeping their post.

None of this was strange in that era, for this, and worse than this, suited the nature of things at that time, and agreed entirely with the

methods of that government; what is strange is that the two Governors should have gone on, after the formation of the present Ministry, doing what they used to do under the shadow of the two fallen ministries. People have not stopped complaining of the Governor of Daqahlia and his violence toward teachers, and his tyranny over their dress, and his dismissal, without delay or patience, of any of them who returned to the style of dress he preferred; and people still recall what is remembered of the Governor of Monufia's affair of the beards — which must be shaved, and which must not be let grow; and some still make excuses for the two Governors with various pretexts, and offer them various justifications. Yet for all that, what all Egyptians know, and believe with a faith admitting no doubt, is that the present Ministry came to power precisely to do justice to the Egyptians after the men of the previous era had wronged them, to lift oppression from them once and for all and to establish justice among them firmly, and to restore to them these sacred freedoms which the transgressors transgressed against, and whose sanctity the sinners violated, with no regard for right, and no preservation of the law's dignity. Everything can be borne except that an Egyptian should see himself, in these days, subject to a Governor's authority and arbitrary rule in the very style of dress he wishes to adopt; everything can be endured except that an Egyptian should see himself, in these days, subject to the Governor in the matter of his own beard — shall he shave it, or let it grow? This is too much a matter for newspapers to wade into, and writers ought not need to explain how much evil and wrong it contains. La Bourse spoke, some days ago, of this matter of the beards, and we felt shame on the Egyptians' behalf that the foreign press should write of them that they are not free to let their beards grow, or to remove them; and we felt shame on their behalf that foreigners should say, in their gatherings, that the Egyptians demand independence, and press for freedom, while still accepting that the Governor should come between them and their clothes, or between them and their beards, when there exists no law that permits the Governor to interfere in the matter of beards and clothes at all. But we put this down to what people used to be subjected to in the past era, of oppression, and to what burdened that past era, of misdeeds and sins. But now — now that the Ministry of the Nation has arisen, to restore to the Egyptians the nation's freedom; now that the Ministry of Right has arisen, to restore to the Egyptians the authority of right; now that men of learning who value culture, civilised men who understand civilisation, free men who hold freedom sacred, have arisen to govern — we hope that the head of the Ministry and the Minister of Education will attend to abolishing this absurdity, erasing this

corruption, and setting free the people's choice in the clothes they wear, and setting free the people's freedom over their own beards too; and to protecting Egypt from being a source of mockery and derision, a means of amusement and jest that foreigners seize upon to relieve themselves of life's cares. The Governors have other work, more useful, more honourable, more obligatory, and graver in importance, than concerning themselves with the matter of clothes and the shaving of beards; and if these Governors are capable of nothing but meddling, skilled at nothing but arbitrary control, and can think of nothing but folly, then their own houses suit them better than governing the provinces. Whatever excuses the partisans of these Governors may spread abroad, no ruler has the right to come between a man and his garment, nor between a man and his beard. Let the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education look into this matter, and restore to the Egyptians their old sense of self, since they are free in what garment they wear, and what form they adopt. For this sense of freedom is the one true foundation on which trust in ministries ought to rest — indeed, on which trust in systems of government ought to rest — indeed, on which trust in the soundness of social life, and its worthiness to endure, ought to rest. It may be among the most hateful things to people that they should be wronged in their money, their posts, and their political rights; but more hateful still than all of this is that people should be wronged in their clothes and in their beards — for there is no way even to describe such a wrong.

And I hope we shall not need to speak of this matter again — just as it is not fitting that the Ministry, with Nessim Pasha at its head, nor the Ministry of Education, with Naguib al-Hilali Bey at its head, should force us to return to this subject.